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WILLIAM H. POWELL'S

HISTORICAL PICTURE

OF THE

DISCOVERY OF THE MISSISSIPPI

BY DE SOTO,

A. D. 1541,

PAINTED BY ORDER OF THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT, FOR THE ROTUNDA OF THE NATIONAL CAPITOL AT WASHINGTON,

WITH AN EXAMINATION OF

THE ORIGIN OF THE PICTURE,

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MR. POWELL,

FOLLOWED BY A FULL AND COMPLETE

DESCRIPTION OF THE COMPOSITION OF THE PAINTING,

WITH HISTORICAL REFERENCES, NOTICES OF THE PRESS,

&c., &c.

PREPARED BY

HENRI L. STUART.

NEW YORK:
BAKER, GODWIN & CO., PRINTERS,
COR. NASSAU AND SPRUCE STREETS.
1853.

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POWELL'S NATIONAL PICTURE

OF

DE SOTO'S DISCOVERY OF THE MISSISSIPPI,

A. D. 1541.

ORIGIN OF THE PICTURE.

Congress early decided on having the vacant panels of the Rotunda of our National Capitol at Washington, filled by eight historical pictures, designed to illustrate the most important incidents in the progressive development of our country, each to be of the uniform size of 12 by 18 feet. They voted therefor the sum of $40,000, to be awarded to the four different artists to whom should be entrusted the execution of the four last of these works of Art. The first condition, following this vote, was that the pictures should all be executed by American artists. A joint committee of Congress was appointed to select the artists, and to decide upon the subjects submitted for final adoption.

The first four pictures occupying the panels had been previously executed by Trumbull, who was well acquainted with the great events and illustrious men of the Revolution. The subjects of his pictures were,

1. The Declaration of Independence.
2. The Capitulation at Saratoga.
3. The Capitulation at Yorktown.
4. Washington resigning his commission at Annapolis, Maryland.

This Committee named Chapman, Weir, Vanderlyn and Inman, as the four artists to execute the remaining four pictures, the subjects of which are as follows :

5. The Baptism of Pocahontas, was chosen by Chapman ;

6. The Embarkation of Pilgrims at Delft Haven, by Weir ;

7. The Landing of Columbus, by Vanderlyn ;

8. The Emigration of Daniel Boone to Kentucky, by Inman—but the death of Mr. Inman prevented the execution of this picture.

It then became necessary for Congress to appoint another artist to fill Mr. Inman's place, as the original committee, on the completion of their labors, had been discharged. The plan adopted by Congress, in this appointment, was to vote upon the names of the different applicants for the commission, of which there were over sixty, until one was chosen. The result of this course was the election of William H. Powell, a native of the city of New York, and a favorite pupil of Mr. Inman, by a unanimous vote of the Senate, and hardly a dissentient voice in the House of Representatives, over every name offered, to execute the eighth and last picture. A joint committee of Congress was afterwards named, consisting of Hon. Jefferson Davis, Hon. John Y. Mason, and Hon. Mr. Pierce (Maryland) of the Senate ; and John Quincy Adams, T. Butler King, and Hon. Mr. Preston (Virginia) on the part of the House, Mr. Adams acting as chairman, to confer with Mr. Powell on the subject of his picture.

Several sketches were prepared by the artist and submitted to the judgment of the committee, who unanimously adopted the "Discovery of the Mississippi by De Soto," as being more important in the magnitude of its results than any other open to an original pencil. We would here, for a moment, ask the reader's attention while we *re-arrange* the subject of the eight pictures *in the order of time* in which they occur, with a view to examine their relative bearings, as intelligible and progressive illustrations of the discovery and historic development of our country.

I. "The Landing of Columbus," (which must be considered as the first grand incident in our national history.)

II. "The Discovery of the Mississippi by De Soto ;" which resulted in opening a mighty empire to exploration and civilization, all of which is, or soon will become, a part of our national territory. We have, first, to consider, if this subject is suitable, and in all respects possesses the requisite importance to justify the artist in selecting it in preference to all others open to his pencil. It would seem that the long line of cities dotting the banks of the Father of Rivers, together with the rushing tide of commerce borne over its bosom in monster crafts driven by the giant

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power of steam, and a numerous array of Sovereign States, are the suggestive and conclusive answer to all such queries. Let us continue our re-arrangement.

III. The Baptism of Pocahontas.

IV. The Embarkation of the Pilgrims at Delft Haven.

V. The Declaration of Independence.

VI. The Capitulation at Saratoga.

VII. The Capitulation at Yorktown.

VIII. Washington resigning his commission at Annapolis, Maryland.

In reply to the wholesale assertion that none of the pictures, except Trumbull's, have a national bearing, we would remark that our artists have commenced their illustrations precisely at the starting point selected by our most celebrated historians, and have quite as rigidly followed the text in their execution, from Columbus to the concluding incident, at which point we may justly consider our independent national existence as being permanently established.

Trumbull received thirty thousand dollars for his four pictures. Chapman, Weir, Vanderlyn, and Powell, each, received ten thousand dollars for theirs.

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

OF

WILLIAM H. POWELL.

Our country having succeeded in establishing, upon a permanent basis, its governmental and commercial institutions, early began to aspire to place upon equally enduring foundations its standard of culture and Art.

The first essays of our artists in this direction have betokened ultimate success, and in some instances they have achieved triumphs of which the most polished nations might justly be proud. In the foremost rank of our artists we may safely place the subject of this sketch.

William H. Powell was born in the city of New York in the year 1820, and consequently is 34 years of age. When seven years old, his parents emigrated to Cincinnati, Ohio. Mr. Powell is at present a resident of the City of New York, where his family have always resided since his marriage in 1840. His studio is at 765 Broadway.

Mr. Powell inherited a fine organization and most happy temperament from his mother, who is a woman of extraordinary powers and exquisite tastes. This combination of qualities in the artist enables him to conceive and execute the most difficult compositions with equal rapidity and skill. From his earliest youth he manifested both aptitude and devotion to the career of an artist, which peculiarity was early understood and encouraged by his mother and other members of the family, and especially by his brother, Thomas Powell, Esq., himself one of the most talented young men in the State of Ohio.

In 1835, he made himself known to the lovers of art by the remarkable picture of Roderic Dhu, the Scottish Chief whom the genius of Sir Walter Scott has immortalized, and also by several admirable paintings of simple and domestic character.

The "Song of the Last Minstrel," by the same great author, gave him the idea of "The Blind Bard," which picture revealed under a new aspect, in 1836, his fresh and budding talent. This picture was universally ad-

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mired, and still holds a proud position in the private gallery of a connoisseur in the city of Pittsburg.

In 1837, Mr. Powell acquired fresh fame by the production of an admirable group, the subject of which was taken from Byron's great poem of "The Siege of Corinth." He painted also in the same year, for the theatre at Cincinnati, four allegorical pictures, which sufficed to testify to his great talent and an exquisitely delicate sentiment in his branch of the Art.

At this time, Mr. Powell became the pupil of the celebrated Henry Inman, of New York, and under his able instructions he made rapid progress, following closely the footsteps of his talented teacher.

In the month of March, 1838, he made his first *début* before the New York public by the exhibition of two portraits at the National Academy of Design, when he became very popular as a portrait painter, and received much attention and encouragement from many of our most wealthy and influential citizens, among whom may be named the late Mr. Brevoort, Philip Hone, and Mr. Henry Cowing; also Dr. E. Parmly, and others.

He set himself to work with renewed ardor, studying now not only the great masters, but Nature herself—he visited all the best schools of painting, and thus enlarged by degrees the sphere of his talent.

The "Pawn Broker," which was exhibited in 1844, is a fine picture, full of originality and power. It was purchased for a very handsome sum by Mr. Cheves, son of the Senator and former President of the Bank of the United States.

In 1845, Mr. Powell went to Europe. He remained a few months in Paris and Florence, and afterwards visited Rome, in which city he remained two years and a half. Here, in the heart of Italy, he devoted himself to the studies necessary to success in the higher branches of historical painting; animated with a lofty and praiseworthy ambition, he studied anatomy, perspective, composition, and costume.

Among the pictures he has produced during the last few years, we may name:—

1. "Salvator Rosa among the Brigands."
2. "The Cattle Driver of the Roman Campagna."
3. "A Woman of Calabria."
4. "The Young Shepherd."

(This picture was given by the Art Union of Cincinnati as their first prize.)

5. "A Neapolitan Fisher Playing the Maudeline."
6. "A Mother and Child."

Soon after, Mr. Powell went to Washington, and exhibited his painting of "Columbus before the Council at Salamanca," in the library of the Capitol. The leading journals of the capital spoke of it in the highest terms

of praise. Washington Irving, after having carefully examined it, wrote a letter to the library committee of Congress, in which he speaks of the work in terms of unqualified commendation. There were over sixty competitors for the commission. Mr. Powell was the youngest of them all ; yet, with his picture on exhibition, so well satisfied were the members of Congress, that he received the unanimous sanction of the Senate, and 198 out of 212 votes in the House.

In 1848, Mr. Powell visited Europe for the second time. Among his most recent works, we may make particular mention of "The Funeral Solemnities to De Soto ;" a picture full of sentiment and of a most impressive character. This last work has been lithographed by Goupil. He has also painted several portraits of distinguished Americans, and has brought with him from Paris, as the latest productions of his pencil, portraits of the most celebrated men of France, military, political and literary, among which are striking resemblances of MM. Eugène Sue, Alexandre Dumas, Lamartine, Abdel-Kader and others.

In all his works, Mr. Powell has displayed a keen eye and powerful hand, in transferring to canvass the very effect he has seen in nature. While gazing upon his paintings, it is almost impossible to suppress the belief that one is actually beholding the very scene itself. He colors with a bold yet delicate hand ; vigorous yet soft and rounded outlines, with atmospheric effects which are peculiar to the glorious climate of the Western World, with its magnificent landscapes and its almost boundless horizons.

His last great work, "The Discovery of the Mississippi by De Soto," is now before the American public, and may confidently challenge the most intelligent and exacting criticism.

Now that we know that the artist to be fully competent, by his antecedents, to be the interpreter of a great national subject on canvass, it is proper to make an intimate acquaintance with the details of his great composition—" De Soto."

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DESCRIPTION OF THE PICTURE.

Our first step in describing Mr. Powell's picture will be to examine its groupings in detail, in order to communicate, to the reader who has not seen it, very much the impression he would get after he had.

There are five great groups in the picture. Not taking them in the order of their importance, but the order in which we look at them ; beginning with the right side, foreground, where we see a company of stalwart men, planting a cross, in a spirit of veneration to the God of the Universe, in solemn commemoration of what they deemed to be a grand event. The expeditions of those days carried with them all the emblems of European civilization. The Priest went by the side of the Conqueror, with the emblems, the traditions, and the worship of the Christian Church. Here the cross is raised with the image of the crucified Son of God. The censer is held by an Ecclesiastic ; and, as he waves it, the incense of Nazareth goes up over the bosom of the Mississippi. The old Priest, whose white beard comes almost down to the Sacred Book he holds, gives his blessing as he plants the Tree of Salvation amid the solitudes of the West. The Herculean man who has dug the place is resting from his labor, looking with earnestness and solemnity upon this act of devotion and reverence. It is a most impressive group, because it illustrates, in the most eloquent and touching manner, how true and sincere was the religious sentiment of that age.

At the left corner, in the foreground, is another group, corresponding in position to the last just described, and illustrating another important feature of the event transpiring. A cannon is being dragged up by the artillery-men : for the cross was always planted in new regions by the Spaniards with incense from the priest, and smoke from the cannon of the soldier. If that point, or either of them, had been left out of the picture, it could not have illustrated the spirit of the sixteenth century.

In the centre of the foreground, immediately between the two corner groups we have mentioned, is the massive iron camp-chest, with arms, helmets, breast-plates, and all the implements of war, thrown together in just that confusion in which they are seen when those who attend a general in his marches have not had time to distribute each thing in its place. In every one of these details, the exact form and model of that age is most faithfully preserved. Even the cannon itself was copied from one of that time. It is of the same model as the cannons used by Cortes a few years before in his conquest of Mexico, one of which was brought from the Mexican capital by General Scott, and is now in Washington city. The artillery-guns, carriages and implements of the sixteenth century, in Spain,

are as easily recognized as the cavalier hat of the age of Charles II., or the Quaker costume of the present day.

In the centre of the picture, exactly, sits De Soto himself, on a magnificent Arab horse, which at that time bore a much higher reputation even than now ; and these horses abounded in Spain, above all other European countries. Thousands of fine-blooded Arab horses were brought to the New World by Spain and its representatives.

Mr. Powell's model for *his* horse was Abdel-Kader's battle horse ; and the utmost extent of Powell's hope, or attempt, was that he should merely paint a portrait of him ; since it was known that nothing on the earth could exceed his beauty, strength, symmetry, and perfection. This horse was then, and still is, in the imperial stables at St. Cloud. There is one thing in this horse most remarkable, aside from its admirable symmetry of proportion ; and it is never seen in any but an Arab horse, that has been perfectly trained ; nor even then, except when he has a rider on his back whom he respects. The horse's movements are full of tremulous electricity ; and yet he moves so gently that he and the rider seem one. The attitude of De Soto is sublime—because it is natural. It is painted at the moment, not exactly of the first, nor of the second glance. It is an earnest, comprehensive gaze at the great river. It is not difficult to conceive of the solemnity and inspiration that would beam from the countenance of De Soto when he looked, for the first time, upon an illimitable scene of future empire for his distant sovereign. There is loyalty—there is surprise —there is grandeur—there is solemnity—he seems not even to have looked on the Fourth Group, that we shall soon describe, in which the beautiful Indian lodges rise up into the soft atmosphere, with an almost Moslem chasteness,—nor upon the Indians, of all ages and sexes, who stand so near ; and even the horse is going unconsciously by baskets of Indian corn, quantities of wild game, and flashing trappings,—all this is, for the moment, unseen, or forgotten, by the man whose eyes rest on the imposing scene that stretches before him. The noble cavalier is followed by what we shall call the Fifth Group—and describe it, before the Fourth. Nearest to him is the Confessor—a venerable man, with flowing beard, who also has caught a glimpse of the great river ; and meekly, and reverently, as he rides on his mule, lifts his eyes and clasps his hands in adoration and gratitude towards Heaven. At his side rides, upon a rampant bay horse, a young cavalier—the type of the chivalry of Spain at that period, both in battle and in discovery ; while they are immediately followed by a hurrying, enthusiastic group of standard-bearers, and helmeted men,—each one representing a separate class, a position, an idea,—each one of whom is evidently there for some purpose—not to make up a group, but to give significance to it ; while, in the left background, above them all, through

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the shades of a grove of the southern live-oak, stretches away a forest of lances.

The Fourth Group consists of Indians ; two young maidens have cast themselves on the ground, almost before De Soto—one of whom bends with the grace and gentleness of a Madonna—and the other, clinging to her sister, like a startled fawn ; behind them stand three Indian chiefs, one a middle-aged man, erect, full of spirit, fire, and daring, gazing upon a new rival invading his empire ; next to him an old cacique or chief bearing the pipe of peace, richly ornamented with the brightest feathers, bending before the conqueror—with a mingled look of suspicion, alarm, policy ; near him, a young chief, with a panther skin thrown gracefully around his loins, the ideal of the "Uncas" of Cooper. He has thrown his bow and arrow to the ground, in token of outward submission—but he draws up his form with haughty pride into the grace, the dignity, and the implacable sternness of an Indian Apollo. As far as the eye can reach, stretches the glorious Mississippi. Its waters are broken by glancing canoes, magical islands, and purple shores ; while in the centre of the background, are shooting up the tall and richly ornamented lodges of the Chickasaws, relieved picturesquely against the sky. The discovery itself was made just after they reached an Indian village, on the Chickasaw Bluffs, where we see every emblem of savage life.

This painting is the most comprehensive work of art ever executed by an American. It is broader, in the field it covers ; it is more complete and universal, in its emblems of life, both civilized and savage ; it is more exact and graphic in every detail. There is nothing belonging to the subject that is not embraced, nor anything embraced which is not appropriate. This must have been the rule that the painter observed in the work, for it could not be the result of accident. Therefore, we find the indications of successful study, and the most learned and patient investigation. There might be a difference among men, of equal claims to taste, in regard to the arrangement of some of the groups, the tone of the picture, and the distribution of light and shade ; but these are details which, in themselves, do not decide the intrinsic value of a great picture, nor impair its moral effect. In these details consists the individuality of a great painter. When followed by imitators, they make what are called Schools of Art ; like the Venetians, who painted everything gorgeously ; and the Florentines, who seemed to have painted without feeling or enthusiasm ; while the Roman school is distinguished for the fullness and dignity of its forms, and the high moral sentiment that is breathed through its pictures. The highest test that can be applied to the style of a great historical painting is its general effect upon a refined mind. It must come up in art, to the standard that is reached in poetry, by the greatest authors. It must not only

inspire a corresponding feeling, that a sight of the scene itself would have begotten,—but it ought to go further ; and, in this picture, Powell has, as a great historical painter should, represented everything that is known, that is essential to be understood in order to make the spectator as familiar with the whole subject, after careful observation, as the painter was himself. We venture to assert that this can be demonstrated ; for a learned and refined man, who has swept that whole field of investigation Powell had to tread, will find the result of all his studies on that single piece of canvass. We pretend to say that no other of the recent pictures painted for the Government, have accomplished any such thing. It was not a difficult matter for Trumbull to do all that was required, by giving us exact portraits, in proper costumes, of the "Signers of the Declaration of Independence." He was familiar with those men. There was little room left for ideal art.

Mr. Powell has overcome one difficulty: where he voluntarily put himself in front of the hardest obstacle the historical painter ever has to encounter—a correct anatomical delineation of the forms of whole groups of men, women, and children, horses, mules, and game ; figures to be represented, from almost complete nudity, up through all the grades of every species of costume characteristic of his figures, to the splendidly-clad cavalier at the head of an army. The figure in the foreground, by the cannon, was regarded by learned artists and connoisseurs in Europe as one of the most striking, faithful, and fortunate anatomical delineations witnessed in our times, whether in painting or statuary. The figure *is* a statue, and stands out from the canvass as distinct as though it were made of marble. Mr. Powell has been accused of painting in costumes and colors too gorgeous: but, after all, this does not appear, when each figure is examined by itself. De Soto is clothed in the armor of that period, as he invariably was when in the field. A graceful purple *par dessus* is thrown upon his armor, to protect him from the burning heat of a mid-day sun ; and the young cavalier who follows De Soto, the only one who wears a gorgeous dress, had to be clothed in that style to represent a class : and so, in going through the picture, every character has a costume that is perfectly in keeping with his class. No two, in the whole picture of sixty figures, that do not represent, with fidelity, a type of one class of De Soto's followers, or one class of savages he encountered.

The Moorish servant, or armor-bearer of De Soto, who is seen behind him, in the Moorish costume, carrying his master's helmet, forms an admirable allusion to the then recent fall of Grenada, and the overthrow of the Moorish Empire in Spain. It was the fashion of that age, as it has been the fashion with conquerors of every age, from the times of the Great Empires of Asia, for the conqueror to carry in his train, in menial service,

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some of the men who were left after the wreck of their national fortunes. De Soto did not form an exception, probably, to the rule then of universal application ; and it was a happy thought in Powell to introduce him there. The very glance at his turban opens a whole field of history to the scholar ; one glance at the turbaned head would recall to Irving his history of Grenada.

It is not always easy to communicate an idea of the moral atmosphere of a picture,—its tone, spirit, and sentiment. We see two peculiar attributes of Powell's mind in his De Soto, which distinguish him from other painters. The first is the poetic tendency of his genius, which gives him a proclivity for the ideal ;—a quality which, if he had gone over that period with a pen instead of a pencil, would have compelled him almost involuntarily to write in verse. The second is a warm sensibility to whatever there is that is genial, soft, delicate, and luxurious in earth, air, sky, water,—and all combined in what will be called the moral atmosphere of his work. But Mr. Powell does not display those qualities at the expense of the sternest reality. Down in the left corner of the foreground sits a veteran campaigner, dressing his wounded leg, apparently insensible to everything going on,—it being the first moment he has had, after a hard campaign, to bestow a little attention upon himself. At the first glance of this figure the visitor will be struck with its suggestive resemblance to the stalwart hero of San Jacinto, under similar circumstances, after that battle. The whole picture is just as real as this figure. It flashes with light, but it is full of honest truth. The best painters in Paris commented especially upon these qualities of the picture ; and well they might ; because, in few historical paintings of modern times, have artists succeeded to such an extent in delineating the actual in the light of the ideal. Powell has clothed facts of history in the garniture which in literature we seldom find, till we leave the realms of prose, and enter the empire of the imagination. Just in proportion as the artist succeeds in faithful delineation of facts in the style of the ideal, in that proportion, he rises above his subject, and does just what art was intended to do,—elaborate from all the materials of nature what, when done, stamps the composition as a creation. No artist ever became great from the mere delineation of nature, as we see it every day ; but nature, as we sometimes see it in those lights and shades that are thrown over it from Heaven. There are moments when the Spirit of the Universe itself is breathed more warmly and genially than at others. He draws aside the curtain of his Everlasting Home, and through them sometimes comes streams of light and sunshine that flood the world in beauty. Sometimes, too, he sends down upon His blushing earth the desolations of a Polar Winter. To paint mere sunlight and mere snow, however, is not the highest effort of pencil. The artist should feel, and

the great artist does feel, so sensitive to all the beauties of the Universe, that whenever he clusters them together, he throws the sunset that he might have seen on the plain, over the brow of a mountain that he may have seen on another continent. It is this combination which makes him a creator. If he does not rise to that, he is a copyist. Prescott, who has passed critically over this field of history, we believe, would say that Powell has done on canvass in four years, what it cost him twenty to do with his pen. We mean, a complete illustration of the spirit of that age.

As a proof of the correctness of the opinions we have taken, in this description, we unhesitatingly leave it for the decision of the nation, when the picture finally fills its panel in the Rotunda. We predict that it will be the subject of more general observation and remark ; that it will set more people to reading about that event and that period ; and that it will, in everything, vindicate its claim to consideration, and above all to originality : for few men, in any part of the world, will feel competent to say much about this picture, until they have done two things—read a great deal on the subject, and studied the composition with care.

HISTORIC MATERIALS OF THE SUBJECT.

In looking at the effort of the artist's genius it will be observed that the figures represent six distinct classes of the time. The priest—the cavalier —the page—the horseman—footman—laborer ; besides these, Indian men and women ; their costumes varying from the mailed cavalier down to the almost naked laborer. Are they truthfully represented? and will the composition of the picture bear comparison with facts as recorded in the pages of history ? In all questions of fact, in order to understand fully the state of the case, we must resort to the evidence.

The accounts of De Soto's expedition, from whence Bancroft, Irving, and other historians have drawn their materials, are necessarily very imperfect. They consist of three documents, "La Vega," "Luis Hernandez de Beidma," and "The Portuguese Relation," all of which were written after the remnant of the army returned to Spain. A period of years had elapsed from the time the Mississippi was discovered ; hence it is not to be presumed that they are correct in every detail.

Here follow the references to the authorities upon which Mr. Powell has based the selection of his figures and the groupings of his composition.

Bancroft, History of the United States, vol. 1, pp. 42, 45, 46, 49, 50, 51, 54.

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IRVING, Conquest of Florida, pp. 41, 296, 297, 302, 306, 319.

LA VEGA, chapters 5 and 6.

PORTUGUESE RELATION, p. 159.

BEIDMA'S French historical collection of Louisiana, pt. 2, pp. 106, 145.

In continuation we copy the following concise and authoritative extract from an able article published in the New York *Tribune* of June 11th, 1853, as it is the completest endorsement of Mr. Powell's method of handling his subject that has fallen under our eye, and furnishes the most satisfactory historical basis for intelligent criticism that has ever appeared :

"About this time, (about 1537,) there appeared at the Spanish Court of Charles V. a cavalier of gentle birth, of noble bearing, and in the prime of manhood. He had been a companion of Pizarro in his Peruvian conquest, and returned to Spain with gold and glory. He appeared at the royal court with all the rich and gorgeous surroundings of the most fashionable Spanish nobleman of that day. He married Isabella de Bobodilla, a young lady of distinction, rank and personal attractions, and thus he was apparently in the possession of all that was desirable in this world. But Hernando de Soto was ambitious, and sought to rival, if not surpass, the glory of the Mexican and Peruvian conquerors. He learned from the account of Nunez of the extensive region called Florida—of its only partial exploration, and the golden stories of the Indians. He applied at once to the Emperor, Charles the V., and was appointed Governor of Florida and Cuba, and organized his expedition. He landed in Cuba, 1538, with a brilliant armament ; and, perfecting his final arrangements, he left his wife, Donna Isabella, to govern Cuba, and sailed for Florida. On May 25, 1539, he landed his forces at Tampa Bay, consisting of 1,000 Spaniards, mostly young men, armed with cross-bows, swords, lances, firearms, and one cannon. He had three hundred and fifty horses, a large number of cattle and swine for settlement; and for the conversion of the Indians he had twelve priests, eight assistants, and four monks. On every Sunday and holiday, he erected an altar and said mass.

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"While encamped on the west bank of the Mississippi river, De Soto was requested by the Indian chiefs to pray for rain to his gods, it being a time of drought ; and he caused a huge cross to be made of the largest pine tree, so large that one hundred men could not lift it. This cross was raised on the highest elevation overlooking the waters of the Mississippi and St. Francis rivers. A procession, composed of the army and Indians, was formed, led by priests and friars chaunting the Litany around the cross, and then all knelt down in front and offered up prayers, and then, approaching the cross, solemnly and silently knelt and kissed it. This impressive spectacle, this planting the cross upon the bank of the Father of Rivers, and worshipping the Saviour more than three hundred years ago —was witnessed by fifteen thousand to twenty thousand Indians."

OPINIONS OF THE PRESS.

[*From the Paris Correspondence of the N. Y. Tribune, August* 15*th*, 1853.]

There is at this moment in Paris, a painting executed by a young American artist, which is a peculiar source of pride to all Americans who have seen it. It is a source of pride because it has created an enthusiasm among the French critics unusually rare. I speak of the work of Mr. Powell, executed for the vacant panel in the rotunda at Washington, just finished. It is a work which has run the gauntlet of French criticism, and has come off not only victorious, but with a degree of commendation rarely bestowed upon a single picture. They call it, without hesitation, the best work which has been executed for many years by any foreign artist in Paris—their *amour propre* would not permit them to pronounce it *the* best painting ; but others do pronounce it the best which has issued from any man's hands in Paris for some time. One of the best tests of the value of this work is the crowds of persons of distinction in the fine arts, as well as in the fashionable world, who daily visit the *atelier* of Mr. Powell ; for it is known that in a city like Paris, with such vast, and in one sense of the word tiresome museums of paintings, it must be indeed a rare picture that can, by itself, in an out of the way place, attract a crowd of people to see it.

Many of the English and French nobility, and nearly all the distinguished men of art in Paris, have visited the picture of the American artist, and they have all expressed themselves with astonishment and admiration at its perfection. They say that it combines *all* the elements in perfection of a genuine historical painting—a result rarely attained. So great has been the enthusiasm, that Jullien, the distinguished lithographer, immediately upon seeing it, offered Mr. Powell 500 francs for the privilege of lithographing four studies from it, to be sold to other artists ; and that is the same price which he gave to Horace Vernet for the privilege of copying from his great picture of "La Smala," at Versailles, and a higher price than he pays to any one else. He has also lithographed the head of the artist ; while Etex, one of the sculptors of the bas-relief on the Triumphal Arch, and a sculptor of great celebrity, has asked the privilege of taking the artist's head in marble. Several of the journals have given very favourable notices of Mr. Powell and his work, and more will soon appear. The Editor of the *Revue des Beaux-Arts*, gave the picture recently a long examination, and left, saying to the artist that he intended to speak at length of that picture in his magazine, and that if Mr. Powell would remain in Paris his fortune was made. The artist, in fine, has been dinnered and fêted in the houses of some of the most distinguished of the French and English nobility in Paris,—a circumstance which shows at least to what extent the enthusiasm for his merit, as displayed in his picture, has reached.

I write this letter to you out of national pride ; because I believe we have a talent for the fine arts, and that we are on the eve of its development, and because I believe it impossible that a nation physically constituted as we are should be wanting in this talent ; and because it is im-

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William H. Powell's historical pict
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portant that Congress should know that the work which it has entrusted to Mr. Powell's hands has been executed in such a manner as to pass, not only with credit, but with enthusiasm, the ordeal of French criticism, the severest and justest criticism which exists at this day.

[*From the London Art Journal.*]

The "London Art Journal," in a criticism on American art, thus speaks of it :—

"We have been much gratified, while passing through Paris, by the sight of a painting by an American artist. * * * * The idea having been merely studied in his own country, Mr. Powell came to Paris to execute this large work. The abundance of materials of all sorts, museums, models, prints, libraries, and information of all kinds, which abound in this city, make it a convenient locality for the execution of large works of art."

After giving a description of the picture the editor concludes :—

"Indeed, the whole shows powerful execution, good observation and knowledge of historic art, excellent drawing and brilliant coloring—the last will mellow down by age. We can but congratulate Mr. Powell on his successful effort, and are most happy to find the American government holding forth inducements to native art and genius by honor and liberal payment."

The editor of the *New York Daily Times*, of December 2d, 1853, in an article entitled "Our National Paintings," says :—

"The same great ideas that belong to our history—ideas of Providence, Religion, Humanity, Commerce, Enterprise, Discovery—are embodied in these works of the creative pencil ; and if not closely allied to our career, yet they are sufficiently so to suggest sentiments of an American bearing. The history of this continent, so far as its northern half is concerned, is intimately identified with our national history ; and hence, if our artists cannot find inspiring themes in the events celebrated in our own annals, we know of nothing more appropriate than those interesting occurrences that opened the way for our civilization. They have certainly a peculiar relation to Anglo-Saxon memories—to American progress—to the taste and feelings of our national mind and being, capable of entire adoption into our reflections on the origin and growth of republican fortunes in this hemisphere. Our nationality is not the only thing to be considered. Where its elements existed, how they were developed and organized, what circumstances were identified with their advance to power, are all matters within the legitimate range of art, whenever it undertakes to give a national significance to its canvas. Our Eloquence and Poetry constantly recognize these facts ; and though the range of Painting is more select, yet if it can appeal to our historic associations, and bind the past to the present, we ought cordially to welcome the canvass which represents these ideas. The mind of the country—at least its intelligent mind—is conversant with those grand preparatory events ; it acknowledges their fellowship with our immediate historic records. All of them are really links in the same great chain, and, therefore, our painters do well to embody them in the efforts of the pencil."

[*From the N. Y. Herald, Oct. 2d*, 1853.]

The composition of this picture, the grouping, the drawing of the figures, and the costumes, &c., the coloring, the lights and the shades, to our judgment, are charmingly harmonious and true. We doubt not, from the three or four years of study and labor of the artist, that everything, including the royal banner, and one or two Moorish warriors in this picture, is historically true, and true to nature. To crown all, the *tout ensemble* is full of life, spirit, chivalry, poetry, and beauty. There is nothing awkward, or heavy, or strained about it ; everything in it is easy, though intensely graphic and spirited.

In reducing his figures below the colossal size of those of the other pictures in the Rotunda, Mr. Powell has gained an immense advantage in space ; and when we consider that the picture is to stand only four feet from the ground, he loses nothing in its individual effects.

[*From the National Intelligencer, Dec. 20th*, 1853.]

An interesting non-political election was that which took place a few years ago, in Congress, of an artist to paint the eighth and last historical picture for the Rotunda at Washington, its choice falling on William H. Powell.

Nine years before, when he was a boy of sixteen, his works had attracted the admiration of the visitors of the Academy of Design at New York. A critic in a New York paper (N. P. Willis) then said that the young artist deserved a pallet of gold. So far from having a pallet of gold, the artist had not at that time gold enough to satisfy the wants of his palate.

The men of the present day are neither so allegorical nor as obligingly imaginative as their ancestors of a few centuries back, and Mr. Powell could not incarnate the idea of his subject in two or three figures. He was obliged to abandon the simple machinery of the infancy of art, and resort to the more labor-giving and difficult, but truer and grander, style invented by modern genius. He had to take the bare fact suggested by his subject, and clothe it with beauty, so as to render it worthy of the interest and admiration of posterity. A moment's reflection will convince the reader of the difficulty of this task. It would have been comparatively easy to paint a battle or any other subject which appeals to any of the great passions of the human heart. But "The Discovery of the Mississippi" was essentially quiescent. An ordinary artist would have made nothing more of it than a group of men on the bank of a majestic river : Mr. Powell has elevated and ennobled it.

The artist has neglected nothing ; the costume and armor of the times ; the manners of savage life, contrasted with those of civilization : the magnificence and pride of the Spanish nobles ; the luxuriant vegetation of primeval forests ; the sublimity of the great inland sea of the Mississippi, have all been transferred with a masterly hand to the canvass. Where the faithful delineation of fact and nature would not suffice, the artist has availed himself of symbolical representation. To this we owe the successful rendering on the canvass of the great ideas of the submission of the Indian tribes, and the important part played by religion, allied with force, in the conquest of the New World.

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